

Title: 1830s Stage Coaches Traveled through our Area

By: Dale C. Maley

It has long been known there was an early mail route running across our part of Illinois between Ottawa and Danville. The 1878 Livingston County history book mentions this line in passing, but it never explains how the mail was actually moved along that route.

The last few years, there have been rumors that stagecoaches operated on the Ottawa to Danville road in our area. The 1878 and 1909 Volume Two history books mention that this route existed and passed through places like Avoca, Pontiac, New Michigan, Sunbury, and Oliver's Grove, with the mail "brought on horseback." There was no mention of stagecoaches, no description of the road, and certainly no timetable. It was assumed the mystery about whether or not there were stagecoaches running through our area would never be solved.

Then, in 2024, a very different piece of postal history turned up by accident. While volunteers were inventorying the Livingston County Historical Society archives, they opened a forgotten folder from the papers of Dr. John Ryan, longtime Pontiac minister and local historian.

Inside one of these folders was his 1915 manuscript "Old Time Postal Distribution in Illinois," including an interview with an elderly former mail carrier named George Washington Rice.

From Dr. Ryan's notes we learned that Rice, as a teenager, carried the mail on horseback between Ottawa and Bloomington, following a weekly route that threaded right through what would later become the Fairbury area.

Rice worked under route contractor W. K. Brown and left Ottawa every Friday morning. He crossed the Illinois River by ferry, then called at a string of frontier post offices: Covell Creek, Otter Creek, a stop near present-day Streator, New Michigan, Sunbury, Pontiac, Avoca, Indian Grove, Lexington, and finally Bloomington.

The trip took him three days one way, mostly riding alone across open prairie, and he earned eight dollars a month for his trouble.

That 2024 discovery finally gave us a name, a schedule, and a vivid description of our first local mail carrier—but it still left the Ottawa-to-Danville route itself mostly in the shadows.

The next big breakthrough came from a lunch conversation between the author and Virgil Voights, who farms around the Streator area. Over lunch in March of 2026, Virgil casually mentioned that there was "evidence of a stagecoach route" crossing his farm. He later followed up with emails, scanned pages, and a hand-drawn township plat he owned. Virgil's map showed an "Old Ottawa–Danville Road" running diagonally in a southeast

direction through sections 5 and 35 of Otter Creek Township in LaSalle County, just northeast of Streator and the Livingston County line. That dashed line runs across the very ground that Virl farms today.

Virl's photocopied pages pointed us toward the article "Post Offices in Northern Illinois, 1837" by Roger Matile, published in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, volume 93, Summer 2000.

For his article, Matile dug into microfilmed copies of the *Illinois State Register and People's Advocate*, the state-capital newspaper at Vandalia. He found that in the June 30, 1837 issue the Post Office Department advertised for bids to carry the U.S. mail on 112 Illinois routes for the contract period January 1, 1838 through June 30, 1842.

Matile transcribed the 28 routes that served northern Illinois and added notes identifying each obscure post office. Buried in that long list of postal routes is the route we care about.

Entry No. 2806 reads: "From Ottawa to Danville, 120 miles and back once a week. Leave Ottawa every Wednesday at 6 a.m., arrive at Danville every Saturday by 5 p.m. Leave Danville every Wednesday at 6 a.m., arrive at Ottawa every Saturday by 5 p.m. Service is to commence on the 1st July, 1838."

Here, at last, is a formal federal description of the Ottawa-to-Danville mail line, complete with distance, schedule, and start date.

Matile's introduction explains how these routes were expected to operate. He notes that most of the mail in the 1830s "was required to be carried in post coaches or stage wagons," both of which needed passable roads even when those roads were only rough tracks across the prairie.

Farther down in the article, he quotes standard contract language allowing the government to accept proposals "for carrying the mails on horseback, in wagons, or carts" where post-coach service was sometimes difficult, but stressing that regular coach or stage service was the norm.

The Ottawa-to-Danville entry itself does not specify the vehicle type, but taken together the instructions make it clear that the government expected a stage line of some sort on that long 120-mile route.

Based on that language, it is reasonable to picture the Ottawa–Danville mail traveling in four-horse stagecoaches or stage wagons, at least during good weather. On muddy spring roads, a lighter open wagon might have been safer; in dry weather, an enclosed coach could haul both passengers and mail.

Either way, this was not just a lone boy on horseback like George Rice on the Ottawa–

Bloomington route, but a more substantial line tying river, courthouse, and land-office towns together.

Once you know Ottawa and Danville were linked by a weekly stage line, the geography of the route falls into place.

These early roads were often laid out “as the crow flies” between endpoints, adjusted only enough to avoid swamps, steep ravines, or major rivers. If you draw a straight line from Ottawa on the Illinois River down to Danville on the Vermilion River, it passes very near the Fairbury–Chatsworth area.

That line also crosses exactly where Viri’s hand-drawn map shows the “Old Ottawa–Danville Road” cutting diagonally across sections 5 and 35 of Otter Creek Township.

Local lore from the Chatsworth area adds one more tantalizing clue. A recent interview with a lifelong Chatsworth resident revealed that some older residents once pointed out faint wheel ruts south of town and claimed they were the remains of a stagecoach road.

Unfortunately, a careful search of Mrs. Stoutemyer’s *Sands of Time Chatsworth* history book and the surviving issues of the *Chatsworth Plaindealer* has not turned up any written reference to stagecoaches or early mail routes in that area.

For now the visible ruts are gone, and the lore remains just that—lore.

What we can say with confidence is that by July 1, 1838, a federally contracted mail route was operating once a week between Ottawa and Danville, most likely using stagecoaches or stage wagons and following a fairly direct diagonal across what is now LaSalle and Livingston counties.

The line almost certainly passed near today’s Streator, Fairbury, and Chatsworth, with one segment running right through Viri Voights’ farm in Otter Creek Township. Another separate line, also beginning at Ottawa, sent young George Washington Rice clattering across the same prairies toward Bloomington with a mailbag slung over his saddle.

Together, these sources—an 1878 county history, Dr. Ryan’s forgotten manuscript, Viri’s hand-drawn plat, and Roger Matile’s 2000 article—let us finally flesh out the shadowy story hinted at in the old books.

We now know not only that a mail road ran from Ottawa to Danville, but when it started, how often it ran, roughly where it crossed our townships, and even what kind of vehicles likely jolted along it.

The next time you drive the modern roads across that stretch of prairie, it is worth imagining a four-horse coach or mail wagon grinding past in the 1830s dust, carrying

letters, newspapers, and land-office papers that helped knit this part of Illinois into the young United States.

